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ABSTRACT

Laredo Junior College (LJC) is a comprehensive community college in Texas, serving a student population that is 93% Hispanic and 61% female. In response to evidence that LJC was not adequately preparing students with the basic and academic skills needed to transfer, LJC expanded and restructured its assessment, placement, and remediation programs. The new program implemented mandatory student advisement and assessment; expanded the remedial English and reading programs; established minimum reading levels for academic courses; and implemented a concurrent enrollment provision, which set a minimum skill level for entry into a course, another level which required concurrent enrollment in remediation for entry into a course, and a third level for unqualified entry into any courses. Obstacles to the program included proponents of a "right to fail" philosophy arguing that an open admissions policy obligated the school to grant students free access to all courses; and concerns about the effects of the program on students, the college, and the faculty. Results indicate that many of the concerns were unjustified: (1) students were not discouraged from enrolling at LJC, rather enrollment increased 25% between 1984 and 1988; (2) rather than getting discouraged and dropping out, students were reenrolling and persisting at much higher rates than before; (3) modifications in the program were made to enable students whose basic skills were extremely weak to maintain full-time enrollment and qualify for financial aid; and (4) rather than losing faculty due to lowered enrollment in disciplines, LJC had to add faculty. Current efforts are geared toward the second phase of the plan, which seeks to ensure that the college-level courses are in fact taught at the college level. (AJL)

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DARING TO DEMAND:

MANDATORY REMEDIATION WORKS!

Thomas R. Mitchell

Paper presented to the faculty of St. Philip's Community College (San Antonio, TX, April 6, 1989).

JC 890 149

Address to the faculty of St. Philip's Community College
San Antonio, Texas
April 6, 1989

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Daring to Demand

First the SAT and ACT, then CAT, T-CAT, P-PST, Ex-CET, TEAMS, and now, of course, the TASP! Test! Test! Test! Will it ever end? Of course it will. But it will end when it should end, namely, when the original purposes of the tests have been fulfilled. And that purpose, colleagues, is quite simple: the public, through its elected officials, wants us to do our jobs, not well, mind you, but <u>at a minimum level of competence</u>. Their demands are clear. Though we seldom think of ourselves as such, we <u>are</u> public servants, and our employers are telling us that we are not doing our jobs. They demand that we shape up and at the very least justify our existence by producing students who can read, write, and compute.

Do they blame you? Yes and no. They are most dissatisfied with the public schools and the poorly prepared graduates they are producing. That's why TASP requires a report identifying high schools and the TASP scores of their graduates. But they are also not impressed with how we, as colleges, have dealt with these poorly prepared students. Few Texas colleges have had mandatory assessment, placement, and remediation programs, and yet we have taken the state's and the student's money claiming to be able to provide these students with a higher education. If

our standards were high, our attrition rates were also extremely high, leaving us open to the charge that we were commiting the fraud of promising and charging for educational services that we could not deliver because we gave "students the right to fail" and provided programs that all but insured that they exercised that right. If our standards were low, our attrition rates were also low and we could provide all kinds of statistical evidence, namely grades, to prove that we were doing a good job. We could feel good, everyone could feel good, but we left ourselves open to the charge that we were perpetuating another sort of fraud, namely, claiming to provide educational services that in any real sense we were just not delivering. Talk about the rock and the hard place. We couldn't win, and the public has rightly suspected that we were, in fact, losing and losing big. They do not really have the evidence yet. But they are working on it. We have been exempt, by and large, from the sort of scrutiny that public schools have recently endured. That is about to change though. Among other things, TASP will require that we evaluate and report the effectiveness of our remedial programs and that we report those courses which students may not take until they have passed TASP, a report that I believe will one day be used by the state to justify imposing standardized entry level requirements for some of our freshman and sophomore courses.

TASP is like a shotgun wedding. We are being forced at legislative gunpoint to do the right thing. If we are to avoid pleading guilty to the two types of educational fraud I mentioned previously, namely foredooming students to fail or selling them the empty promise of an education, we must prepare the unprepared. TASP is causing everyone great stress and long hours, and we are all by now very tired of hearing about it, but we must see the challenge of TASP as an opportunity to do the right thing. But if we are going to do the right thing, then we might as well go all the way. And TASP does not require that. TASP requires only that we do the half-right thing, that we test, place, and remediate, but it does not yet, and I stress yet, require that we go all the way and establish basic skills preprequisites for the college level courses that we allow students and the state to pay their money for.

It is clear that ST. Philip's intends to go all the way and do the right thing by its students.[2] I congratulate you. Establishing a comprehensive basic skills program which establishes entry level requirements for all courses is a difficult, painful, but courageous and, to my mind, entirely necessary job. I was invited to be with you today because as Division Chairman of English & Communications at Laredo Junior College I have lived through the process of developing such a program, because I have taught in the program and administered it for 4 years, and most importantly, I guess, because I and my

college have survived the experience in something like good shape. I may be wrong, but I think I know what your concerns are. You have many questions and more than a few anxieties and objections perhaps. We did too. But we went ahead anyway and did what we thought and still think is the right thing to do. We do not regret it. And if you forge ahead and implement the excellent recommendations of your focus groups, you will not regret it either.

A little background on Laredo Junior College is necessary before describing to you the basic skills program that we developed and its effect on our school.

Laredo Junior College is a comprehensive community college enrolling 5,000 students in its regular programs and another 4,000 or so in specific job training, continuing education, or adult literacy programs. 93% of our students are Hispanic and bilingual. 61% are female. 74% are 25 years old or under. 52% are part-time. And about half are enrolled in vocational and occupational programs and half in traditional academic transfer programs. To compare ourselves with St Philip's, we are slightly smaller in overall enrollment and in vocational and occupational programs. The Hispanic minority enrollment at other Texas colleges, St. Philip's included, is clearly the majority at LJC. Though I do not have statistics with me to back it up, I believe LJC probably enrolls a higher percentage of Hispanic students than any other college in the state, perhaps the country.

Because our students are overwhelmingly bilingual, most being Spanish dominant, and because Laredo traditionally has been ranked as one of the poorest cities in the country, most of our students are first generation college students who come to us with severe educational and literacy deficiencies. LJC has thus always had at least one remedial course in English.

The first course I taught at LJC when I arrived there in 1973 was English 301, the sole remedial course in English required of those who scored below 13 on the ACT, in effect those who tested below the 20%ile nationally. Prior to 1985, LJC's remedial program consisted of that 1 remedial course in English, 1 remedial course in reading (with 2 levels of placement), and 2 remedial courses in math. The program, however, was required only of academic students. And no course other than freshman English and college algebra required enrollment or completion of the remedial courses as a prerequisite. That meant that the 15% to 20% of our students reading below the 6th grade level and writing at an even lower level than they read were allowed to enroll in such courses as history, physics, political science, chemistry, and philosophy. At one point 60 to 70% of our students read below the 10th grade level. And yet, of course, we were giving them the chance to prove themselves by allowing them to enroll in virtually any

course we offered. Guess what? They did prove themselves. We made sure of that. For our fraud -- unplanned, unintentional, and woefully widespread nationally though it may have been -- was to sell the students, the community, and of course ourselves the lie that the students were succeeding, doing just fine, thank you, because our grades proved it. During the 70's and early 80's they began to do better than just fine. They did outstanding. From 1970 to 1980 the percentage of A's in academic courses more than doubled. In my department alone -- English, mind you -- close to half of our students were making A's and B's. Despite that, the English department began admitting the fraud, telling the administration that we were not doing a good job, that our grades were inflated and our standards low, that we suspected the same could be said of other disciplines, and that we should do something about it. It is a bit extraordinary and I guess disconcerting to hear educators admit that they are doing a lousy job, but our candor was not enough to give us credibility. We had no proof, and afterall there were those darned good looking grades. And everyone knew the outcry that would arise on campus and perhaps within the community if we expanded the number of required remedial courses and mandated certain levels of basic reading, writing, and math skills as prerequisites for enrolling in courses other than college composition and algebra.

Then the evidence came. Laredo State University, an upper

level institution sharing our campus, began requiring its students to pass an English competency exam in order to graduate and 50 to 60% of our students failed the exam on their first try. Then came the P-PST. And again our students did poorly, particularly in reading and math. The administration, at least the President and the Academic Dean, was convinced. Our failures, once hidden by grade inflation, had been unmasked. We had to improve the quality of our college level courses. But how?

Either we could commit the other fraud -- allowing students to continue to enroll in virtually any course they wanted while we raised standards so high that many, if not most, had no chance to pass the courses -- or we could do the right thing and prepare them for college level work before we allowed them to attempt college level work. We could "give them the right to fail" or "give them the right to succeed."

Like any respecting institution, we formed a committee to study the matter, the Developmental Studies Advisory Committee, sort of a combination of the 3 focus groups at St. Philip's. Composed of faculty and administrators, with equal representation from both academic and vocational-occupational disciplines, the committee began its work in the fall of 1984. And work it was. We met once a week for an average of 3 hours. We studied, we debated, we politicked behind the scenes of course, and we more

than once let our tempers get the best of us. In retrospect, we fought for the very soul of our institution. I will discuss some of the issues that we debated, some of the apocalyptic prophecies that we heard, and some of the very real anxieties we all had about making perhaps the most important institutional change in the school's history. But first let me describe what we ultimately did. And I want you to note how very close your focus groups' recommendations are to what we ended up doing.

1. We required that every student be assessed and advised.

2. We expanded the remedial English program from 1 course to 3 courses, established placement criteria for each level, doubled the number of students required to take remedial English, and made the program mandatory.

3. We established minimum reading levels for academic courses. Our goal was a minimum 12th grade reading level, but not being entirely reckless we began with a minimum 7th grade level for the first year and established a yearly increment for 5 years until we reached the 12th grade. Freshman English, by the way, had had a minimum 10th reading level for over a decade, but no other course, except the Nursing program, had had any reading requirement at all.

4. We expanded the remedial reading program to include 5 courses instead of 2 so that we could place students homogeneously. Through post-testing, however, students would be allowed to place out of reading at any level.

5. We left math alone essentially, but some science courses began requiring basic math skills as prerequisites.

These changes provided the foundation. Unfortunately, the Dean of Vocational and Occupational programs refused to cooperate at the very last moment, and so the program affected only academic students. In the following year, however, our new President made it clear that vocational and occupational students needed basic skills also, and so he asked the committee to meet for another year to work them into the program. That was a rough year also. The chart that I have provided to you illustrates the present results of that process. Each year we update it, and so far, each year we have raised the requirements and refined them, a major change being the concurrent enrollment provision.

Quite simply, we remain an open admissions community college, but we do not allow unqualified access to specified courses and programs.

Now let me relate the obstacles and objections we faced in planning and implementing this program. And, of course, let me describe our experience with the program and its affect on the institution.

1. The first and most persistent obstacle that one must confront is philosophical. Again and again we were told by opponents that "students have the right to fail," that as an "open admissions"

institution we were obligated to grant "open admissions" to all courses and that by not doing so we were penalizing, punishing, and otherwise discriminating against students who could take those same courses elsewhere. A sinister variation of this charge is the assertion that we would be specifically discriminating against bilingual, Hispanic students who should not be expected to meet national or even state expectations.

This objection must be answered, and the institution must make a commitment one way or the other, nothing in between. Our response was that community colleges should grant everyone the opportunity to receive an education, but that opportunity must be interpreted not as simply the opportunity to enroll in college but the opportunity to succeed in college. Allowing students who cannot read into a course requiring extensive reading is an absurdly superficial, narrow application of "open opportunity." Further, we claimed that the most insidious form of educational discrimination against minorities, insidious because it is often couched in terms of compassion by well-meaning people, is to assume that minorities cannot achieve at the same level as the majority. Specifically, we argued that many problems of the Hispanic community are related to either a lack of education or the presence of 2nd and 3rd rate schools and educational programs in our communities. If we were not to be another such 2nd rate educational experience, if our students were to receive the education that they deserved and <u>needed</u>, we

had to raise standards and we had to prepare them to meet those standards.

Settling that debate is the major obstacle. I do not know if it is or has been an obstacle at St. Philip's, but it was at LJC. It was a minority position, but its advocates were vocal. Most, and I am not being unkind or cynical, I can assure you, were not so much philosophically opposed to mandatory remediation as they were concerned about their enrollments. The "right to fail" argument, however, has the merit of not seeming to be self-serving. Now that their fears of enrollment declines have been alleviated, the former advocates of the "right to fail" solidly support the basic skills program. I can think of only one faculty member who remains totally unpersuaded. There was another one too, but he decided to build apartment complexes instead.

2. Of major concern to everyone, of course, even to those strongly favoring mandatory placement and basic skills prerequisites, are the effects of such a program on the student, the school, and of course, themselves. These worries constitute the second obstacle.

These are some of the fears and concerns that were expressed. --Would students be discouraged from attending college if they had to take remedial classes? AND, would this discouragement be enormously compounded by our plan to require that students take

as many as 3 remedial English classes, 1 or 2 reading classes, and 2 remedial math classes?

--Would keeping them temporarily out of courses that did want to take but they were not qualified to take compound the discouragement.

--Would they just not come or would they drop out after one semester?

--Would they go to another college?

--Would very weak students be able to enroll in enough remedial and non-remedial courses to maintain full-time status?

--Would enrollments drop in disciplines with basic skills prerequisites? And, if they dropped, would jobs be protected?

These questions, of course, are concerned with the quantitative, not the qualitative, effect of a mandatory remediation program. But never overestimate educators' ideals when they are challenged by the institutional and personal instinct to survive. We are, after all, human beings despite what our students sometimes think.

Before implementing our program, we of course did not know the answers to these questions. We did our best however. We studied previous placement scores and predicted enrollments, as you have. We asked for and got a commitment from our Board of Trustees that no instructor would be let go during the two year "transitional period" simply because of low enrollments. And, importantly, just to be conservative, we set a 5 year

implementation period for raising reading levels for academic courses -- the first year 7th grade, the second 8th, the third 9th, the fourth 10.5, and the fifth 12.0 Later we added a "concurrent enrollment" plan, at the request of vocational disciplines, a plan which set a minimum level for entry into a course, another level with a range which required concurrent enrollment in remediation for entry into a course, and a third level for unqualified entry into a course. We also held the student reponsible for meeting the requirements which were in effect during the year of his first enrollment, thus "grandfathering" a considerable number of students in.

Now what happened? Well, we learned a lot. Mainly we learned that we had been far too anxious, far too fearful.

1st: Did the college discourage students from enrolling? Just the opposite. Our enrollment in 1988 is 25% higher than it was in 1984, the year we planned the program. Did specific disciplines lose enrollment because of the new basic skills prerequisites for their courses? We have no proof that they did. A few disciplines experienced declines during this period, but these declines had begun in the years preceding the program. No instructor in any program has lost his position because of the program, and we have long been out of the transitional period in which jobs were protected. Further, only one instructor for only two semesters during this

4 year period has had to teach a remedial course out of his discipline as part of his load. In fact, rather than losing positions, we have had to add them.

2nd: Did students get discouraged and drop out? Just the opposite. The rate of reenrollment is phenomenal (see the chart). Those placed at the lowest of the three levels of developmental English reenroll at the same rate the next semester as those at the other levels or in freshmen English. Over half are still attending after 4 semesters. And believe me, these are academically extremely high risk students, many barely able to speak English.

3rd: Did students resent having to take remedial courses? I will not tell you that most of them love the idea. No. But you would be surprised at the number of students who enroll with us just to take our remedial courses and improve their reading or writing skills. Also, by allowing students to retest once befor having to take a remedial course, we have eliminated the tendency on their part to disbelieve their initial scores.

Of the 1,500 students enrolled in remedial English or reading last fall, fewer than 20 asked me to make an exemption. And if you can believe this, I hardly can myself, I have fewer challenges now to remedial placement with three levels of placement than I did with just one.

What is more important than their initial reaction, however, is their evaluation of their experience in the class. And, to the shock of many on my campus, we found that students in remedial classes gave higher evaluations to the course and the instructor than students enrolled in transfer courses. That and an a reenrollment rate of 87% is a pretty good indication that the students feel that they are spending their time productively.

4th: Would extremely weak students be able to qualify for enough remedial and non-remedial courses to maintain full time enrollment, and, of course, qualify for financial aid? Sometimes it is tough on advisors, but we find a way. First, we have, as you can see from the chart, a number of "skills" type courses which have no basic skills prerequisites. Second, we have combined three hour remedial courses into six hour courses to give students the option of moving slowly or quickly through the sequence of required remediation. For instance, a student placing at lowest level of remedial English must take 3 remedial English courses, 311, 312, and 313, a year and a half! By combining 311 and 312 into a six hour course, 601, students may telescope two full semesters of remedial English in one semester. The 600 courses are extremely popular with both students and instructors, and they of course have helped in scheduling a full 12 hour load for students and in reducing some of the resistance to the

program, both that of the students and the instructors waiting for students to complete remediation before taking their courses.

In sum, though we were not sure in 1984 if were "cutting our own throats," as some put it, we took a "leap of faith" and made the commitment to a comprehensive, mandatory basic skills program because we felt that it was the only right thing to do by our students. In retrospect, I think our fears and anxieties were only natural under the circumstances, the fears of rational, cautious professionals considering radical changes. But our fears were exaggerated, and we were fortunate not to have to pay a heavy price for doing the right thing. In fact, I think we were overly cautious.

We are also fortunate in having a program in place that conforms almost identically to the mandates of TASP and, in fact, goes beyond those mandates, as do the recommendations of your focus groups.

Our major curriculum efforts now are directed toward the second phase of our original plan. Remediating students, preparing them for college level work is the first step. The second step is to ensure that college level courses are indeed taught at the college level. If through remediation students are prepared to read college level assignments and write college

level papers, then instructors who have become accustomed through the years to not requiring extensive reading or writing assignments must make a major adjustment in their expectations. If you prepare students to do more, you must in turn expect more. Our emphasis this past year has been on "writing across the curriculum" and increasing reading assignments.

Have we had results? Unquestionably. But let me caution you; the results will not be immediate, particularly if you phase in implementation or grandfather students into the program. And, you must be realistic. One or two semesters of remedial English or reading or math cannot miraculously transform students. Twelve years of inadequate instruction or student effort cannot be overcome in 4 months. That is too much to expect from yourselves and your students. BUT, experience has shown that remedial programs can provide students with sufficient skills to have "an opportunity for success." Not giving them those skills is just providing them with another opportunity for failure or a second rate education.

Two days ago, a colleague of mine, the Texas Civil War historian Dr. Jerry Thompson told me of a student he advised 3 years ago who called him long distance this week. When he first met her, she had was a Job Corps student who came to him wanted to take academic courses because, she said, "she wanted to be a lawyer." She could barely speak English at the time, and she had to take our remedial courses. He thought that she was just

another student who had unrealistic expectations. Well, she did all right. She was calling him from UT at Austin wanting his advice. She had a 3.9 GPA and had just been accepted to three law schools -- UT, Michigan, and Columbia. Which should she choose, she wanted to know?

We must never forget that an education makes us free men. It gives us choices, opportunities. And the paradox is this. Given our current situation, to make this freedom possible, to give our students the opportunities that come from education, we must be responsible professionals and not give students the choice of pursuing an educational track that we know dooms most of them to failure. Mandatory remediation and entrance requirements for courses temporarily deny students freedom so that one day they can be truly free.

Notes

1
TASP is the Texas Academic Skills Program, a legislative initiative which requires that all students enrolling in a Texas public college or university take a test of college entry level skills in reading, writing, and math. Institutions must advise students and place them in a remedial program if they fail any of the three parts of the exam. Students must remain in a remedial program until they have passed all three parts of the exam. Further, students must pass all three parts in order to receive a certificate containing 9 general education hours, an associate degree of any type, or enrollment in any upper level course after they have accumulated 60 college credits. Institutions must evaluate their remedial programs and must report, among other things, courses at the freshman or sophomore level which require, as prerequisites, passage of one or more parts of the exam. TASP then is a hybrid between a "rising junior test" and an entrance assessment exam. Most importantly for institutions, it makes remediation mandatory and continuous.

2
St. Philip's College formed focus groups in 1987-88 to make specific recommendations for implementing TASP requirements. In addition to making sound recommendations for meeting the mandated requirements of TASP, St. Philip's has recommended that each discipline develop basic skill entry requirements for its courses, something TASP does not require.

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